

# Cost of destroying wetlands

The saying that water is life makes no better sense than it does in Pallisa district. After the destruction of Limoto wetland, which was a major source of drinking water, residents say Pallisa has become lifeless. The restoration of Limoto is what Pallisa wants for life to come back, but this is not about to happen, **GERALD TENYWA** writes.

**O**n bad days, you can buy a 20-litre jerrycan of water at not less than sh600. The same amount of water used to go for sh100 when it was being pumped from the nearby Pallisa's residents.

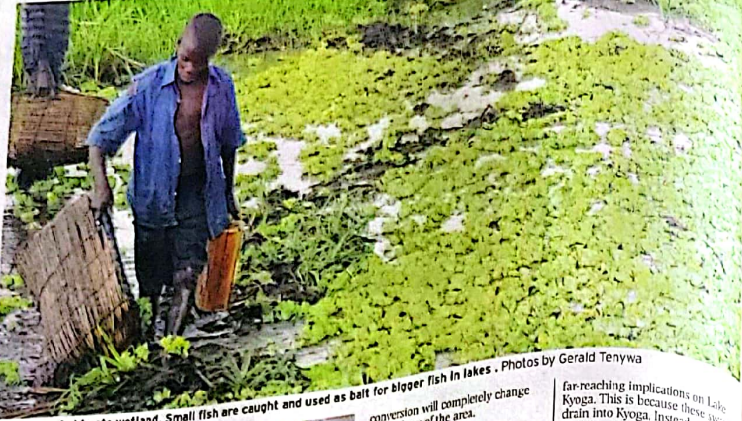
In a region regarded as one of the poorest in Uganda, spending sh180,000 in a month on water alone is considered as something out of this world, according to Emma Bazibu, a resident of Pallisa. He says he would have saved much more money if the price of water was not high.

"It is not easy to earn money, yet we have to spend heavily on water because we cannot do without it," Bazibu said. "The money we are spending on water would be invested in income-generating activities."

Water in Pallisa was cheap and abundant, including Bazibu, did not know its worth. However, it became a different story when Lake Lemwa was silted and the water-level dipped, leading to a stop in water pumping activities.

The eastern Ugandan town depends on bug infested water ponds as well as water springs on its outskirts. The water is ferried either on bicycles or motorcycles, but when the dry spell sets in, the price of water rises. Cyclists have to move further to get the water, which means residents digging deeper into their pockets.

**HOW PALLISA LOST WATER**  
About 10km from Pallisa town is where thousands of people in the neighbourhood of Limoto swamp, who have decided to take matters in their own hands. After repeated crop failure outside the swamp, cultivators have turned to Limoto swamp to eke a living.



A fisherman in Limoto wetland. Small fish are caught and used as bait for bigger fish in lakes. Photos by Gerald Tenywa



**sh180,000**  
The amount of money an average person in Pallisa spends on water every month

**10**  
The number of districts that surround Lake Kyoga

Fishing is one of the lifelines for the people of Pallisa

officer of Pallisa. "This is what is behind the choking of Lake Lemwa." In the dry season, he said, the water in the previous decades when Limoto was still alive. So, Pallisa only gets trickles of water from Limoto and if this continues, we will be in a dire situation.

**LAKE KYOGA SUFFERS**  
The destruction of swamps such as Limoto in eastern Uganda has far-reaching implications on Lake Kyoga. This is because these swamps drain into Kyoga. Instead of feeding the lake with water, the rivers and swamps deliver silt to the lake, leading to the growth of weeds. Kyoga is surrounded by 10 districts in eastern, northern and central Uganda. It is an important breeding ground for fish and a habitat for endangered birds including the shoebill. The Nile from Jinja crosses the lake on its way from Lake Victoria to Egypt.

As climate change hits home and Uganda shifts from rain-fed agriculture, Kyoga could become an important source of water for drinking in the upcoming urban centres near the lake and for irrigation in water-deprived areas.

**WHAT HAS GONE WRONG?**  
Regulation to prevent the reclamation of wetlands is no longer working according to Mafabi. "The wetlands are for our common good," he said, adding: "What used to be collective property is now owned by individuals. People have parcelled out wetlands into plots where they grow rice." In some cases, the new 'government' of the swamp hire out their pieces to people coming from as far as Tororo seeking to grow rice in the swamp. "We should look beyond money because the wetlands offer water, which is going to be expensive to pump from far when we need it for irrigation," said Mafabi. He said the problem is that there is low production on people's land that has led to low incomes and food insecurity. "People used to grow cotton as a cash crop but when the cash crop economy collapsed, they discovered that they could reap food and income from the swamp."

**FROM LIFELINE TO LIFELESS**  
Apart from being a reservoir, Limoto has been giving fish to thousands in the districts of Pallisa and neighbouring Kibuku district. As crops withered during the dry season, Limoto offered fish. This helped Pallisa to escape adverse impacts of the dry spell. But such environmental goods and services that could increase the resilience against the changing climate are disappearing at the hands of the people who are supposed to look after them.

The swamp also plays host to wildlife, including migratory birds that make stop-overs on their way to South Africa or Europe. The birds together with the bees help to pollinate crops, something that enhances the productivity of crops on people's farmland outside the swamp. The absence of birds means less productivity, according to Achilles Byaruhanga, the executive director of Nature Uganda, a partner of BirdLife International.

As the environment becomes hostile to the fish and other creatures, the human population is also under threat. "It was very hot during the dry season. People blame this on the residents who destroyed the swamp," Paul Mafabi, the director of environment planning in the environment ministry, said. Mafabi said the wetland used to regulate the micro-climate of Pallisa, but people did not know its worth until it was torn into shreds. "People know that the hostile weather has come because of their actions," he said.

conversion will completely change the ecology of the area.

# Pallisa price of water soars

## Pallisa water pump brings hope



The water levels in Limoto swamp reduce further every year

cultivators are now following the nutrients washed down by soil erosion into the swamp. But the benefits from encroachment will be short lived. "The fertility in the swamp will be exhausted after two or three seasons," Mafabi said.

**MUSEVENI DIRECTIVE**  
Prior to growing of rice in Limoto, people did not know that water storage could become a problem. The crisis has helped to raise awareness. President Yoweri Museveni currently refers to wetlands as water granaries and the leaders of Pallisa agree with him.

Museveni recently ordered people to get out of the wetlands, but his order has not yet been executed. Two weeks ago, a team from the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) and the wetlands management department in the environment ministry went to Kibuku and launched the demarcation of Limoto wetland.

To show who is inside the swamp and who is not. "We have got more funding from the Government and we want to secure the wetlands for posterity," said Collins Oloya, the commissioner in charge of wetlands in the environment ministry.

**WILL ENCROACHERS LISTEN?**  
Wily Kakuru, a lecturer at Makerere University and a researcher at the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, says getting people out of the wetlands should be socially acceptable in terms of politics and economics. "It is not the first time the President has told people to get out of wetlands. He is also the same person who has in the past ordered wetlands management department, NEMA and the National Forestry Authority (NEA) to not touch the wetlands. But people do not want to get out of wetlands."

"I do not know," Kakuru said, adding: "It is possible for people to get out of the critical areas of the swamp and then use a smaller part of the swamp for rice cultivation." Four years ago, Kakuru did a study in Limoto to establish how best the wetland could be used without hurting its ecology. This resulted into the formulation of guidelines, which the wetlands management department intends to implement under what they are calling, "guided use of the wetlands."

**BREAK THE WALLS IN GOVT**  
The work is cut out for the Government in Limoto wetland. "What takes people into the swamp is water and nutrients," said Mafabi, adding that the ministries of agriculture, water and environment as well as one of local government should co-operate and intervene. The rice can be grown outside the swamp. "The problem is that people were given upland rice, but ended up in the swamp in search of water and nutrients," he said. This means that if water is provided outside the swamp, the land will become more productive and people will have no time to invade the swamp. "We need to work together collectively as Government," Mafabi said, adding that getting people out of wetlands is not enough and that people need to lead productive livelihoods outside the swamp. In the event of shocks such as crop failure, the communities would turn to the swamp for fishing and selling a few of their animals such as cattle and goats in order to survive.

It is a different world for Simon Kapaata, a resident of Pallisa town. Kapaata used to go to his garden behind his residence to earn a living. Today he goes to Kasoda village where construction of a new water pump is beginning to take shape. This is where water will start flowing into Pallisa for the first time in a decade. The water pump became clogged after Lake Lemwa was clogged with silt. At the same time, the water level retreated leaving the pipes taking water to the pumping station hanging above the water. After securing funding from World Bank, the Government has hired a Chinese firm to construct the water pump. The company has hired Kapaata and his youthful colleagues as labourers. "I earn sh8,000 and it is good money because it is not easy to get work," Kapaata who is a casual labourer at Pallisa Water Works told Saturday Vision in an interview. In addition, Kapaata, and the water-starved community are excited about the new water initiative, which is promising to wipe away their fears. "It is exciting to work and we hope to deliver water to residents of Pallisa."

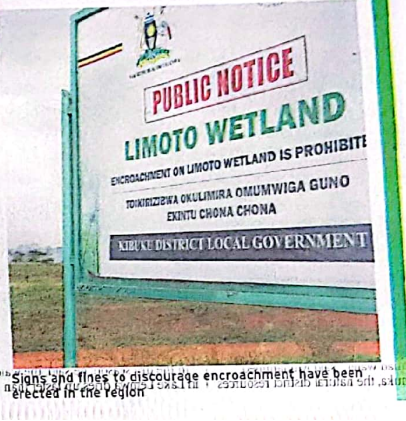
The construction of the water plant and restoration of Limoto wetland may not be enough, according to Richard Musota, a team leader under the directorate of water resources management in the environment ministry. "Soil erosion is rampant in Pallisa because soil cannot retain the water," he said. He said restoration of the environment will not take place any time soon. "It will take place in about 10 years if people start conserving the soil upland," Musota said, adding that trees have to be planted with contours to control soil erosion. "As we control water, we will be retaining top soil, which is a thin layer of soil that is important for agriculture."

engage them in ways that will give them sustainable livelihood on their land and promote wise of the environment. As a result, more water, food and income will keep flowing. They will not thin cut even when climate change disasters such as drought and floods hit Pallisa.

## Action taken to heal Pallisa



Labourers at a construction site for the new water pump



Signs and fines to discourage encroachment have been erected in the region